

ian suffrage bills must be
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uffrage had an easier time
rend Mr. Leach of Mont-
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to grant them the vote.

The Selling of Vermont: From Agriculture to Tourism, 1860-1910

by Andrea Rebek

T oday Vermont is a mecca, the last "unspoiled land." Vermont evokes images of white church spires in the midst of rustic villages, tidy farms dotting rolling, verdant countryside, rivers and lakes of pristine beauty. Each season brings with it a different crop of visitors, eager to breathe the fresh air, take in the magnificent fall foliage, ski the slopes of Mansfield, or to hike on the Long Trail. To hear what is said about the state gives the distinct impression that Vermont is unique, a world apart from sister regions in New England. One gathers that Vermont has been ever blessed as the site of idyllic vacations and as one of the prime centers of scenic splendor in the Northeast. But this present attitude has all but buried the historical past. It is a myth because Vermont has not always been the apple of the tourist's eye. The thesis of this article is that the roots of the myth stem from a combination of Vermont's economic situation and the emergence of larger attitudes toward nature during the late nineteenth century. Thus, the focus is on the selling of Vermont, 1860 to 1910.

I

Introduction: "the bloomy flash of life is fled"

Evidently Vermonters themselves had to be sold on their native state. Although the greatest tide of emigration occurred before 1850, after that date Vermont's growth rate was nearly stationary, and markedly disproportionate to the growth of the United States as a whole. Between 1850 and 1860, the state's population increased by 978 people, 0.3% over the 1850 census, while the population of the United States grew by 35.6%. The 1870 census shows a jump of 15,453 or 4.9%, a growth rate still far lower than the nation's (22.6%). The census for both 1880 and 1890 reported a less than 1% increase in population for Vermont while the United States grew more than 25% in both decades. Not until 1900 did Vermont again register a population gain comparable to that recorded

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in the 1870 census. Vermont's main means of livelihood, agriculture, suffered as a result of what appeared to be widespread rural decline in northern New England. The upheaval of the Civil War, the lure of the West, and the growth of cities drew people off the farms. Furthermore, the development of the railroad in Vermont after 1850 made possible the opening up of mining, quarrying, and manufacturing industries, which tended to attract Vermonters out of backwoods areas to these centers. Emigration from Vermont had reached 200,000, according to the Census of 1870. The 1910 Census reported a gradual increase in the number of farms from 1850 to 1880 (totaling 5,759), but noted a net decrease of 2,813, or an average of 94 per year, during the following thirty year period. As early as 1872, the *First Annual Report* of the Vermont State Board of Agriculture sounded the alarm, and proposed a variety of somewhat quixotic solutions to keep young people on the farm. Suggestions were offered on how to make farm life more pleasant; farmers were urged to make improvements to augment farm value, and to be proud of their land and achievements. Above all, one theme was constant: "Vermont as Home."

Other trends undermined Vermont's agriculture. By 1870, the bread baskets of the Midwest furnished stiff competition in marketing staple farm products. The rivalry forced Vermont's wheat production down 92% from 1869 to 1899, while corn fell 30%. In the early phases of decline, farmers still saw hope. T.H. Hoskins, in an article entitled, "Vermont as an Agricultural State," written for the State Board's first *Report* (1872), was typical of those who painted a bright future. He argued that Vermont's position in relation to the markets of southern New England and New York was unrivaled, especially because of the quick and direct access provided by railroads. However, the vision was spoiled by the reality that the same technology would serve other distant regions equally well in getting goods to market—which is, of course, what made Midwestern competition so potent.

During the same period, which Harold Fisher Wilson has termed a time of "abandonment and retrenchment," Vermont experienced a decrease in the amount of improved land, a drop in farm values, and the desertion of economically untenable hillside farms. The extent of the decline in improved acreage is difficult to pinpoint, as the decrease may be partially explained by changes in definition; for instance, after 1880 abandoned fields and rocky pastures were excluded from the improved category, lowering the figure for the 1890 census by over a half million acres. The abandonment of hillside farms may have reflected several forces: dissatisfaction with rural life (as members of the Board of Agriculture thought), failure to compete for staples marketed on the same scale as the Midwest, or changing patterns of settlement. Regarding the latter suggestion, Wilson has pointed out in *The Hill Country of Northern New England* that eighteenth century settlers considered hillside land ideal because it was not swampy or subject to spring flooding, and was easier to clear. Not until dense lowland forests were cut

away and the land allowed to dry out did valleys have appeal as potential farms. It was difficult at best for families to eke out a living on steep, rocky land, and by the third quarter of the nineteenth century many were no longer disposed to try. One author reflected in the state agricultural *Report* for 1878 that "we have places here in Vermont, that remind us of the lines . . . 'Deserted Village,' where

The sounds of population fail,

No cheerful murmurs fluctuate in the gale

No busy steps to the grass grown footway tread,

But all the bloomy flash of life is fled."

A number of Vermonters, to paraphrase native son Stephen A. Douglas, found their state a fine enough place to be born in, but a better one to leave. One wonders if outsiders had any more affection for Vermont than the residents. The literature of travel may hold one key to that question; accordingly, at this juncture, an examination of responses to Vermont's scenery and resort business in the 1860's and 1870's is appropriate.

II

The 1860's-1870's: "the Green Mountains . . . are more generally admired than visited:

Americans in the mid-nineteenth century approached nature through the landscape. Touring was a must for anyone of means: there was nothing more likely to lift the soul than the thunder of Niagara Falls or restore health like the waters of White Sulphur Springs. The way in which people described scenery provides clues to both the expectations of resort-goers and to the popularity of certain scenic locales. In 1852, the landscape painter Charles Heyde wrote his mother-in-law, Louisa Whitman, about the grandeur of the views near his new home in North Dorset, Vermont. The whole distance, he said, was so shut in by mountains that one had to look straight up to see the sky. "Nothing could be more solemn and sublime than the effect of these mountains whose tops are amid the clouds the shadows of which rest upon their surfaces." Sublimity and picturesqueness were the watchwords of the age, carried to America in the writings of the late eighteenth century English aestheticians, Edmund Burke, Richard Payne Knight, and William Gilpin. Interpreted by native Hudson River School artists, the sublime particularly denoted obscurity, power, silence, vastness, and roughness. Note the descriptive phraseology chosen by the editor of the *Burlington Free Press* to describe his climb to the top of Mt. Mansfield in 1859: "The ascent of the last mile and a half was as steep, rugged, and exciting as any one could wish for." The party was forced to form a single line to pass through the dense forest; the undergrowth was thick and tangled on either side of the trail. "On the whole," he exulted, "it was steeper and steeper, wilder and wilder, rougher and rougher as we went on."